

MGNREGA AND CREATION OF DURABLE ASSETS: A STUDY IN SANGRUR AND BARNALA DISTRICTS OF PUNJAB INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the most wide ranging flagship programmes of Govt. of India. Conceived in the year 2005 as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and later rechristened as MGNREGA, (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) provides for guaranteed employment for 100 (hundred) days in a year to adult members of a rural household registered under the Act. The primary and foremost objective of the programme is to ensure livelihood to rural masses especially during the lean season of the agricultural cycle when demand for labour is low. This welfare intervention of the Govt. is to mitigate hunger, starvation and deprivation in rural India and to ensure living wages to the adult members of a rural household who come forward to seek unskilled manual labour work as per the provisions of the Act. The prime objective of the present study is to ascertain the efficacy of the MGNREGA in creation of durable assets in two districts of Punjab where agriculture is crucial to the economy and life and style of the people.

KEYWORDS : MGNREGA, MGNREGS, Asset Creation, Durable Assets, Agricultural Cycle, Poverty alleviation, Community Assets, Gram Panchayat, Rural Development, Job Card, House Holds, Unskilled Manual Labour Work, Livelihood Security, Employment Guarantee, Micro Irrigation, Traditional Water Bodies, Line Department & Convergence

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INTRODUCTION AND CULMINATION OF THE MGNREGA

India is a country characterized by a very large labour force in informal sector, which is either casual or self employed and comes from rural areas and it goes without saying that employment in agriculture is vastly influenced by the agricultural cycle. It is during the lean period of agricultural cycle when a large labour force becomes vulnerable to hunger and starvation. Unfortunately the labour in informal sector is not ensured legal protection, health and other benefits as are available to the workers of formal sector (1) Faced with such a situation there was a need to evolve a scheme through guaranteed employment to ensure security of livelihood, alleviate hunger, starvation and deprivation, reduce distress migration from rural to urban areas and offer benefits of such an all inclusive scheme to women and the socially and economically backward alike.

The efforts for rural poverty alleviation started way back in 1960s and Food for Work Programme (FWP) was launched in 1977. National Rural Employment Programme was launched in 1980 and in 1989 the above two programmes were merged into JawaharRozgarYojana (JRY) implemented through Panchayati Raj Institutions.

This programme was later on reformed and reshaped as Jawahar Gram SwaiRozgarYojana (JGSY). Employment Assurance Scheme (EAS) was envisaged in 1993 to create rural employment during agricultural lean season. In 2001 the Govt of India introduced SampoornaGraminRozgarYojana by integrating EAS and JGSY. Under the scheme onus for implementation of the programme was on Gram Panchayats. But these schemes failed to yield the desired results and despite the best of intentions, implementation remained weak and often there were overlapping objectives of various schemes creating confusion. Thus, came National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, in the year 2005 and later renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) whereby the Sampoorna GraminRozgarYojana (2001) and FWP (2001) were integrated.

The preamble to MGNREG Act states that it is an “Act to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work” (GOI-2005)(2)

The NREG scheme was initially introduced in the selected backward districts of the country but later on extended to cover the whole of India in 2008-2009.

MGNREGA and Asset Creation

The Act (MGNREG Act) provides for creation of durable assets which would lead to creation of more jobs and rural productivity thereby reducing the dependence of rural folk on Govt for employment schemes such as NREGS.

Hirway, Saluja, and Yadav (3) have stressed that the role of an employment guarantee scheme such as MGNREGS shouldn't only be guaranteeing or assuring work to the poor, because such a guarantee would have limited impact in a larger time frame. Thus, the creation of sustainable assets which act as engines of growth is a must so as to absorb the surplus manpower and additions to the labour force. If the employment guarantee is assumed to be an end itself it would lead to eternal dependence of rural labour force on NREGS. Thus, they conclude that in addition to the immediate impact in terms of poverty reduction, a well designed employment guarantee programme can lead the economy towards labour intensive growth path through the creation of assets. The productive value of MGNREGA's work has been criticized as a futile attempt. “to play with mud, to create a road that goes from nowhere to nowhere, to dig ditches that will be wasted away in the next monsoon” (4) But there are some restrictions imposed on the works which can be under taken under the MGNREGS so as to ensure that the works, under taken are labour intensive and in the work wage to material ratio has to be 60:40. The limiting factor is provisions to the extent of 40 % only for materials in the selected work.

Types of Work Under MGNREG Scheme

The Operational Guidelines: MGNREGA -2013(5) provide details pertaining to the new works which can be undertaken under the scheme. The guideline no. 7.1.5.imposes following conditions mainly

- Only those works can be taken up which result in creation of durable assets and strengthen livelihood resources of the rural poor.
- The order of priority of works will be determined within the Gram Panchayat and will be reflected in the annual plan ratified by the Gram Sabha

- The 60:40 ratio for wage and material costs should be maintained at GP (Gram Panchayat) level for all works to be taken up by GP and for works to be taken up by all other agencies, it should be maintained at Block / Intermediate Panchayat level.
- No contractors and no labour displacing machinery shall be used in the execution of works.

The assets can be created in an individual's land and in the community land.

The following table enlists the works which can mainly be undertaken –

Table 1

Nature of Work	Type of Work
Water conservation and harvesting	Digging new tanks/ponds, small check dams, etc.
Draught proofing and plantation	Afforestation, tree plantation, etc.
Flood control and protection	Drainage in water logged areas, construction and repair of embankment etc.
Land development	Plantation, land leveling, etc.
Micro irrigation Works	Minor irrigation canals, etc.
Renovation of Traditional Water Bodies	Desilting tanks/ponds, Desilting of old canals, desilting of traditional open wells, etc.
Provision of irrigation facility in lands owned by Scheduled caste and schedule tribes, beneficiaries of land reform, etc.	Individual assets for weaker sections.
Rural connectivity	Construction of roads, etc.
Any other activity approved by ministry of rural development	Other works etc.

Source: Compiled from MGNREGA –Guidelines 2013, 4th edition and <http://nrega.nic.in>

MGNREGA in Sangrur and Barnala Districts of Punjab

The Sangrur and Barnala districts are located in South and South-West of Punjab where agriculture is predominant occupation. Annual rainfall is low(50-70 cm) as compared to Northern districts and cropping pattern is characterized by availability of irrigation facilities through tubewells (power based) and canal system comprising micro irrigation channels which are fairly developed. Availability of canal water and high density of tubewells has put great pressure on the natural and underground water resources and the level of water table is receding at an alarming rate. Currently the depth of water table ranges from 12.25 m to 30.15 m below ground level in Sangrur and it varies from 14.43 m to 24.82 m below ground level for Barnaladistt. (6) From MGNREGS's point of view Punjab has 22 districts and 147 blocks, 12.72 lakh households were issued job cards in 2015-16 of which SC & ST households comprised 76.57% and 0.3% of the total respectively. 7480 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year 2015-16 in the state.

Sangrur district has 10 blocks and there were 68,231 registered households in the year 2015-2016 of which SCs formed (54,348 HHs) 79.65% and ST's 0.01 % only. A total of 330 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year under considerations.

The district of Barnala had 22,670 registered households of which SCs constituted 88.83% and STs 0.039% only. 145 families had completed 100 days of employment in the year 2015-16 in the district which has 3 blocks. (Data culled from <http://nrega.nic.in> Reports, Districts). The districts under consideration generated 33,399 and 14,982 person days of employment in the year ending March 2016 through MGNREGA against 760, 872 man days generated in the whole state.

The Methodology: The appraisal has been carried out in all the ten blocks of Sangrur and three blocks of Barnala, selecting at least 2 villages from each block. The data has been generated through site visits, personal interviews of the beneficiaries, Gram Panchayat and MGNREGA officials. The ten blocks falling under the administrative precincts of Sangrur are Ahmedgarh, Anndana, Bhawanigarh, Dhuri, Dirba, Lehragaga, Malerkotla, Sangrur, Sherpur and Sunam. The three blocks namely Barnala, Mehalkalan and shehna fall in the Barnala district.

The Assets Created

The following two tables suggest the nature and to some extent the approach of Gram panchayats in selecting works under the MGNREG Scheme.

Table 2: District Barnala – Assets Created

S.No.	Block	Villages	Activity /Assets Created	Nature of Activity	Individual/ Community Asset
1	Barnala	Barnala Rural (Dehati) Karamgarh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction of “Pucca” village alleys / lanes Cleaning of village drains etc. Construction of new village pond in 4 Acres of land Earth filling in cremation ground and raising levels of “Kutchha” village roads. 	Rural connectivity Flood control Water conservation Rural connectivity	Community Assets
2	Mehalkalan	WazidkeKalan WazidkeKhurd	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renovation of village ponds Cleaning of village canal (“Sua”) Cleaning of village roads and berms. Digging of new village pond Cleaning village irrigation channel Increasing the depth of village pond Renovation and raising the level of Cremation grounds 	Renovation of traditional water bodies. Micro irrigation Rural Connectivity Renovation of traditional water bodies. Micro irrigation Renovation of traditional water bodies. Flood control	Community Assets
3	Shehna	MaurNabha SukhpuraMaur Patiala	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cleaning of village water channels Renovation of village pond & building retaining wall for the same. Internal cleaning of village “khals” /water channels Cleaning of berms of roads of village roads. Construction of Rajiv Gandhi Sewa Kendra Cleaning of village drain for safe. evacuation of water Cleaning of Sukhpura irrigation channel 	Micro irrigation Renovation of traditional water bodies. Flood control & Micro irrigation Rural connectivity Flood control Micro irrigation	Community Assets Community Assets

Table-3: District. Sangrur – Assets Created

S. No.	Block	Villages	Activity /Assets Created	Nature of Activity	Individual/Community Asset
1	Dirba	MehlanKhas Mehlan Model Gram • DhandoliKalan	1.Renovation and cleaning of Cremation ground in the village & village roads/berms. 2. Digging and Cleaning village water channel (“Kassi”) 3.Cleaning of village water channel. 4.Renovation of village ponds	Rural interconnectivity Micro irrigation Micro irrigation Renovation of traditional water bodies	Community Assets
2	Sherpur	Tibba Gobindpura	Afforestation through tree plantation on village common lands. 2. Cleaning of pond. 3. Cleaning of village drain.. Cleaning of village drains Raising the level of low lying lanes Water Works & cremation ground & village roads. Tree plantation	Drought proofing & land development Renovation of traditional water bodies Flood control Flood control Rural interconnectivity Drought proofing and land development	Community Assets
3	Sangrur	Balian Namol Kheri	Brick lining of “Kutchha” village water (“kassi”) channels Cleaning of village drains. Tree plantation in village common land 1.Construction of NREGA Bhawan 2.Digging & cleaning village pond Cleaning of village stadium, dispensary & High School land	Micro Irrigation facility Flood control Drought proofing and land development Renovation of traditional water bodies Land development & sports	Community Assets
4	Malerkotla	Rannwan Hathoa Sarod	1. Cleaning of village pond Digging of new village pond Construction of NREGA Bhawan Drainage system in BazigarBasti& Cleaning of pond. Construction of pucca street lanes in village.	Renovation of traditional water bodies. ---do--- Flood control Village interconnectivity	Community Assets
5	Lehragaga	Ladal • Gaga	Cleaning of village pond Raising and cleaning of margins of village nullah ‘1. Cleaning of village pond ‘2. Putting earth / raising margins of village roads ‘3. Building of park land development & earth filling in low lying areas.	Renovation of traditional water bodies. Flood Control Renovation of traditional water bodies Village interconnectivity Land development	Community Assets
6	Sunam	Namol • Sheron	1. Construction of NREGA Bhawan housing Rajiv Gandhi Sewa Kendra Digging of ponds for water conservation in 3 Acres of land appox. Cleaning of village pond Plantation of trees etc	Water conservation Renovation of traditional water bodies. ---do-- Afforestation/land development	Community Assets
7	Dhuri	Maana Dhandra	Raising of level of school land by earth filling Cleaning & raising margins of village roads. Cleaning of village ponds & margins of village roads	Flood Control Rural interconnectivity. Renovation of traditional water bodies	Community Assets
8	Bhawaniagarh	Pannwan • Gharachaun	1. Digging and cleaning of village drain 2.Cleaning of village pond and raising a “bundh” side wall Development of park & play ground near village Bus-stand. Cleaning of village roads and berms.	Flood Control Renovation of traditional water bodies Renovation of traditional water bodies Rural interconnectivity	Community Assets
9	Anndana	Mandavi RamgarhGujran	Renovation of cremation ground and cleaning of village hospital, berms and roads. Cleaning of village water channel. Raising of margins of roads & cleaning berms	Rural interconnectivity Micro Irrigational Facility Flood control	Community Assets

Table 3: Contd.,					
10	Ahmedgarh	Rurka TakharKalab	Cleaning of village “kutchra” roads Cleaning of village drains & ponds Cleaning of village pond.	Village interconnectivity Flood Control & renovation of traditional water bodies. Renovation of traditional water bodies.	Community Assets

Critical Analysis of the Assets Created

In all the 28 villages surveyed in the two districts the Gram Panchayat ‘Pardhans’ / Sarpanchs and the 150 beneficiaries were asked – “ Do you think the work done under MGNREGA would benefit the village community in the short run, long run or immediately ”and “Whether the work completed under MGNREGA will have to be re-done in near future.” About 88% of the beneficiaries replied that the assets created would benefit the village community immediately and 75% of them opined that the work completed wouldn’t have to be re undertaken in near future. The Sarpanchs were almost unanimous in their opinion regarding benefits reaped from completed works.

It is really noteworthy that asset creation in individual lands is conspicuous by its absence in the two districts as almost all the works undertaken fall under community Assets.

Perhaps the Gram Panchayats and line departments found a greater merit in creating assests in community land or village ‘Shamlats’ than in developing assets in the individual land which could be very useful to the selective poor. This might be linked to the finding that almost none of the beneficiaries surveyed owned land and in the two districts irrigation facilities, access to fertilizers and mechanization in farming are fairly developed and non beneficiaries who are marginal farmers could use these resources as and when required. Whether the use of these resources rendered the farming un-remunerative for marginal farmers is the question not delved into at that stage.

Overwhelming number of community assets created indicates an apprehension that if assets are created in individual land, the provision will be misused by powerful, rich and influential farmers in the villages. This outcome clearly endorses the views of Shah Mihir “Taking goals of NREGA-1 forward August 14, 2009 in (7) The Hindu. Majority of the Sarpanchs / Pardhan Gram Panchayats (95%) responded that community assets couldn’t have been created without MGNREGS. Almost all the beneficiaries concurred on this aspect. This finding is more or less similar to that arrived at by Sushant Kumar Mishra in “Asset Creation under MGNREGA: A study in Three Districts of Madha Pradesh [Article prepared by Sushanta Kumar Mishra based on the project report by a team of faculty members comprising of PradyumanaDass, RohitKapur and Sushanta Kumar Mishra of IIM Indore (8)

The nature of works undertaken indicates an overwhelming preference for renovation creation and cleaning of traditional water bodies or village ponds or ‘Chhappars’ as they are called in local jargon. In Punjab these bodies are usually used for bathing cattle and local drainage where ever separate drainage infrastructure is not provided. These water bodies generally lie in the middle of villages and thus their cleanliness, augmenting depth and raising **bundhs** around them were taken as first priority by the Gram Panchyats.

Improvement in irrigational facilities through cleaning and earth / silt removal from village water channels [‘Kassi, Sua’ in local **parleyance**] is another activity preferred under MGNREGS. In Barnala district in the villages of WazidkeKhurd and NabhaMaur and shekhupuraMaur (Patiala) the irrigation channels have been extensively clenep up. In village Balian (Sangrur block, disttSangrur) portions of micro irrigation channels (‘Kassis’) have been de-silted and brick

lined to improve water flow and availability. Nirantak Singh Balian, the village leader informed that it has benefitted nearly 500 to 600 small farmers dependent on irrigation through canal water. This has enabled sowing of paddy in Kharif season thereby increasing re-muneration by Rs 10,000 to Rs. 15,000/- per acre annually for land tillers. In the same village Balian-Thalesan and Balian-Bara Garaon channels have been cleaned up to improve drainage, water flow and augment availability of water throughout the agricultural cycle.

Village Karamgarh in Barnala block of Barnala district is another success story as far as creation of durable community assets is concerned. In the village a new water pond has been dug in almost 4 acres of land for water conservation. The earth obtained from digging has been utilized for raising the levels of cremation grounds, road-margins and village lanes to prevent flooding during rainy season and improve village interconnectivity.

Similar was the case in Namol where 4 small ponds have been dug up in an area of 3 acres for water conservation.

In Namol (Sunam block, SangrurDistt.) and MaurNabha (Shehna Block, distt.Barnala) and Sarod (Malerkotla block, SangrurDistt.), NREGA 'Bhawans' have been built up. It is heartening to note that these places have spacious 2 to 3 rooms along with a big hall with bathrooms and an open vacant space around them. This infrastructure is being used by the economically backward strata of the village to perform marriages and other functions thus saving them the expenditure of hiring marriage palaces or 'dharamshalas' for the purpose.

Efficacy of Assets Created

The choice and execution of works under MGNREG Scheme in the two districts clearly renders them of marginal utility in the long term. Cleaning of traditional water bodies, cremation grounds, villages lanes would have to be re-undertaken unless alternative drainage and cleaning facilities are made available. These works give diminishing returns with the passage of time and can't kick-start sustainable growth cycle, though they provide immediate benefits to the people.

Works related to improvement in irrigational facilities wherever undertaken have resulted in improvement in agricultural facilities, increase in crop yield and remuneration for farmers and would lead to sustainable growth. Works in individual land haven't been undertaken in any of the 13 blocks surveyed in the two districts.. Construction of NREGA Bhawans have improved community facilities and some of them now house Rajiv Gandhi Seva Kendras. These 'Bhawans' are now being used for community services and act as community centers for organizing medical camps & get together on special occasions.

Afforestation and drought proofing are not among the preferred activities undertaken under the scheme. There is sample scope for these activities because of depleting forest cover in general in Punjab. In fact in the two arid districts under consideration, afforestation is required to be undertaken on a much larger scale. Similar is the case with works related to water conservation and water harvesting.

Development of play grounds and parks would be useful for the youth which need to be swayed away from the threat of drug addiction. This is another activity which would lead to community welfare in the long run.

Works related to improving village connectivity haven't been quality wise prudent and have mainly been confined to cleaning roads margins and berms or leveling of 'Kuttcha inter village roads'.

Nowhere the basic earthwork under MGNREGA has been carried out for construction of rural link roads under PradhanMantriGraminSarakYojana(PMGSY). Convergence in execution of works between other schemes and NREGS is low.

Having said all that one has to keep in mind that MGNREG Scheme is demand driven wage employment programme to mitigate starvation, hunger and deprivation in rural areas and focuses on labour intensive works to be executed through unskilled labour. It is noteworthy that all the beneficiaries and Gram Panchayats/Sarpanches interviewed were unanimous in rejecting introduction of mechanization in construction and other NREGA related activities.

Never the less self-sustaining growth can be achieved through that poverty alleviation programme by making wise choices pertaining to works to be undertaken and creating a synergy between works under taken under line departments and MGNREGS and other welfare schemes. Indeed high degree of convergence of activities undertaken in line departments and MGNREG Scheme is need of the hour to usher in a regime of sustainable development in rural India through labour intensive works.

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